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## Prisoners learn a trade – and help the hungry

### Work-release inmates operate deer butcher shop

By *MOLLY MURRAY*  
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Over the last decade, Delaware has been plagued by an overpopulation of deer -- animals that eat crops, collide with cars and play havoc with fragile, native habitats in parks and other protected areas, authorities say.

For some state residents -- especially in tough economic times -- that overpopulation is turning into a blessing through an innovative partnership of hunters, state environmental officials, food pantries and the Delaware Department of Correction.

And it turns out the program to distribute surplus venison to food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters may even help prison inmates find a good job once they are released from jail.

"I have a skill I can use," said Jeff Mickens, an inmate at the Sussex Work Release Center near Georgetown. "I've learned a trade out of it."

Within the fenced walls of the work-release center, prison officials took an old garage and turned it into a butcher shop -- complete with stainless steel cutting tables, a refrigerator and a meat grinder.

Here, a small team of inmates learn the art of cutting meat and turn surplus venison -- donated through the Sportsmen Against Hunger program -- into ground meat that is distributed to nonprofits that work with the state's neediest residents.

"I can't express how important this program is to our mission," said Ricky Lecates, of Blessings Unlimited, a food pantry that is run out of Bay Shore Community Church in Gumboro. "We would not be able to serve as many people as we do without deer meat -- and we receive it at no cost, supplementing other food items that we purchase at low cost. We rely on that and it's just such a blessing."

The food pantry, based in rural Gumboro, like others throughout the state, has seen a dramatic increase in the number of people who need help.

Lecates said the number of people seeking services has increased by 50 percent in the last three months.

In all, more than 20 charities -- from the Salvation Army to Wilmington's Sunday Breakfast Mission -- participate in the free venison program.

The program had its start through Delaware Sportsmen Against Hunger. The state group started out urging hunters to donate a package of venison when they picked up their processed deer from the butcher shop. Hunters also could donate an entire deer, along with the butchering fees.

Then, state environmental officials decided in 1992 to assist with the butchering costs. That year, the butchering fees totaled \$16,319 for 400 deer that were donated to the program.

As state officials encouraged hunters to harvest more deer -- in an effort to get the population under control -- the number of donated deer rose, and rose and rose. In the 2006-2007 hunting season, for instance, 1,311 deer were donated to the program and butchering fees were nearly \$50,000.

Patrick Emory, director of the state Division of Fish and Wildlife, said he realized he had a double problem -- too many deer, along with the associated problems of crop and habitat damage -- and a program to use excess deer that had become increasingly popular and costly.

It costs \$45 to process one deer at a butcher shop, Emory said. "We knew our budget was limited."

So Emory came up with an idea. He called the warden at Sussex Correctional Institution and suggested a training program for soon-to-be-released inmates.

The deer butcher shop was born three years ago.

Initially, Emory said, some of his staff thought it was crazy to put knives in the hands of inmates. But Emory said the program is "extremely controlled."

Sgt. James Kahoe, who was trained and licensed as a butcher in Maryland, runs the program and said it has been both problem- and accident-free.

The deer are processed just as a butcher shop would do it, he said. They arrive field-dressed, meaning the internal organs have been removed. The inmate team skins the deer and hangs the carcass in a walk-in refrigerator to allow it to cure. That improves the quality of the meat, Kahoe said.

Once the meat cures, the deer is brought inside the shop, where inmates section the carcass and remove the meat from the bones. The meat is then run through a grinder twice and turned into venison burger, he said.

The inmates also learn to break down and clean equipment that would be used by a meat cutter and learn to trim and cut the parts of a deer -- skills which can also be applied to pork or beef carcasses.

But for the venison donation program, all the venison is ground and packed in two- to three-pound packages, then frozen and distributed to charities throughout the state.

The inmates who go through the program get a certificate they can take to potential employers.

"This gets 'em in the door," Kahoe said. "It may not get 'em a job ... but it gets 'em going in the right direction."

For Mickens, the program is providing options. Mickens is a house painter by trade but now, he said, he can also work as a meat cutter.

And there is something more.

"I'm giving back while I'm here," he said.

## Other inmate programs

Carl Danberg, Department of Correction commissioner, said the venison partnership is one of several programs designed to help inmates learn a new skill and contribute to the community.

At Sussex Correctional Institution, inmates operate a farm where they raise fruits and vegetables that supply the prison system and the hungry. And there is a program to raise beach grass, which is planted to stabilize dunes along the coast, he said.

"It is also our role to try to model positive behavior," Danberg said. "We're proud of what we are doing."

During deer hunting season, walk-in coolers are located at several locations throughout the state, including Augustine Wildlife Area in New Castle County, Woodland Beach Wildlife Area near Smyrna, Redden State Forest, Assawoman Wildlife Area and Trap Pond State Park. Hunters can drop off field-dressed and registered deer at those coolers for processing.

"Delaware has a challenge managing its deer herd," said David S. Small, deputy secretary of the state Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control. "In this economic climate ... there is an increased need. This is one small way we can make a contribution."

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